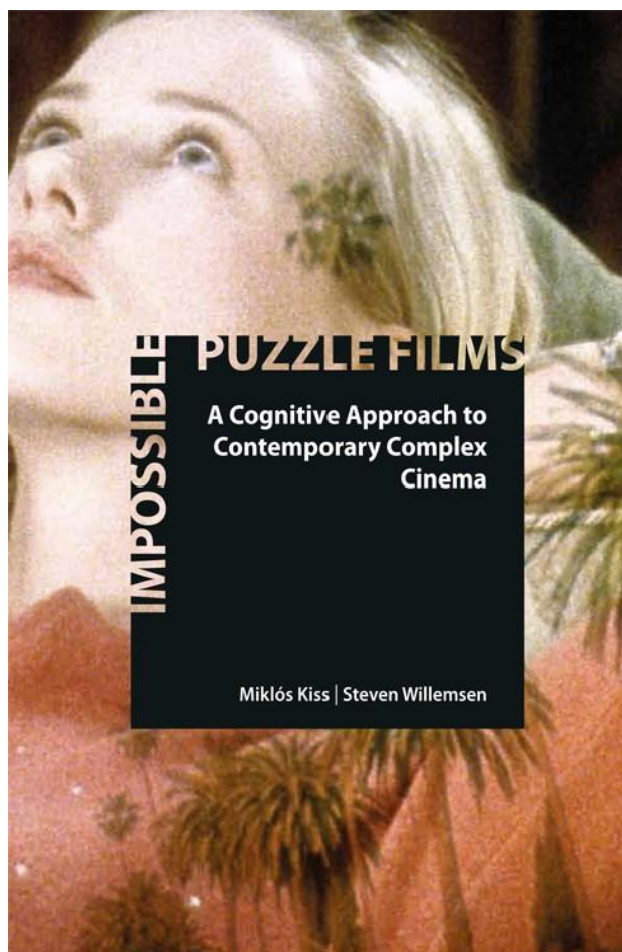


# Impossible Puzzle Films, or the Attraction of Sense-Making

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## BOOK REVIEW

Miklós Kiss and Steven Willemsen. 2017. *Impossible Puzzle Films: A Cognitive Approach to Contemporary Complex Cinema*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 232 pages.

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*Impossible Puzzle Films: A Cognitive Approach to Contemporary Complex Cinema*, by Miklós Kiss and Steven Willemsen (2017), is one of the most detailed studies produced so far in the field of contemporary non-linear narratives, usually known under the umbrella term of “complex narratives.” To begin with, the authors present a good overview of the field, setting out many of the terms used by theorists in the debate: “unnatural narratives,” “puzzle films,” “modular narratives,” “forking-path narratives,” “multi-draft narratives,” “multiform narratives,” “database narratives,” “post-modern narratives,” and so on. Their explanation of what this complexity consists of is also convincing. For this alone, the book would be well worth reading. However, the authors aim higher and succeed in fulfilling the expectations raised in the

introductory chapter. In fact, Kiss and Willemsen manage to address a gap in the field: they work out a synthesis of what complex films are and what they entail. Therefore, they not only consider narrative structures as formal devices contained in films, but they also perform a cognitive account of the way viewers react to these devices. Hence, as a combination of two types of book, *Impossible Puzzle Films* has the makings of a must-read for anyone interested in narratology, psychology, film studies and cognitive science in general.

The choice of the general category analysed in the book, i.e. “complex cinema,” addresses not only the need for human sense-making and the explanation of fiction in general, but contemplates in particular the interest raised in viewers by certain films from the mid-90s onwards. Kiss and Willemsen attribute the responsibility and activity called for by this phenomenon equally to viewers and film authors. If the [film] texts contain clues and ambiguities that trigger an increased hermeneutic activity on the part of the viewers, the latter gladly engage in repeated viewings and information sharing on specialized forums. From a meta-narrative perspective, these films are baits that engage viewers in *debates*, although the authors do not clearly state this. What they do say is that complexity is “foremost a viewing effect – a ‘cognitive puzzlement’ that occurs when a film obstructs or suspends its viewers’ construction or comprehension of the story” (page 26).

Kiss and Willemsen distinguish between (a) films which are “deceptive” but comprehensible, at least at the end (by means of a twist, for example); (b) films which are “disorienting,” due to pervasive ambiguities or an extremely fragmented structure, but which ultimately can be understood; (c) and films which are “impossible” to make sense of, since they have been designed as full-blown enigmas. The latter is the category they call “impossible puzzle films” and which forms the core of the book. All of these sub-groups involve strangeness and spectatorial bafflement, but only the latter two are really complex, functioning as puzzles. The difference between them resides mainly in the possibility of analytical success allowed by the films themselves. Whereas in the ordinary (i.e. “solvable”) puzzle films, viewers can decode the filmic structure and learn the rules of its making, eventually naturalizing its sense in accordance with the logic and physical properties of their real world, in the “impossible puzzle film” no such thing is allowed. This

category includes films which, globally, cannot be decoded and whose dissonances will never be resolved, whether they are located in the diegesis by means of some pseudoscientific attributes – such as the use of time machines in loop narratives and other apparatuses that clone characters – or whether they are imposed by the narrative structure itself through mutually exclusive events, temporalities or people. Since they are the most “complex” of all films, they can also provide the viewers with immense pleasure, since, according to the authors, pleasure is commensurate with the amount of time and effort spent looking for a (re)solution.

Films belonging to the three above-mentioned sub-groups all share traits with classical narratives. The more complex they are, however, the fewer traits they share. Kiss and Willemsen continually remind the reader that the narrative classical paradigm is nevertheless an important component of non-modernist fictional films. Therefore, their category of impossible puzzle films is directed at mainstream commercial cinema, although many a critic, scholar and general viewer might claim that David Lynch, one of the directors whose work is under scrutiny in the book, does not conform to this cinematic stance. The authors claim that the viewers’ interest and fascination with these films is a consequence of their attraction to stories and storytelling. Their argument is that where there is a story there is meaning, and where there is meaning there will be an effort to uncover it. Therefore, impossible puzzle films produce an intensified immersion, tied to the viewers’ cognitive activity and not to any character’s psychological motivations (which do not exist in this filmic category). In trying to discover “how the film works” (page 163), viewers make use of several mimetic strategies in order to “naturalize” the different types of dissonance they encounter. It is their way of finding logic in the filmic actions according to the rules of the everyday reality they know. Anything else crosses over to the category of the art-house film in which it is not the actions (i.e. the story) that matter, but rather the ideas and their aesthetic environment. Ultimately, when viewers fail to make sense of impossible puzzle films they can always stop looking for explanations, adopt a poetic stance, or alternate between different interpretative postures. In Kiss and Willemsen’s view, this does not constitute an altogether art-house-inclined reception - although that is what art film viewers do when watching such films – because spectators of mainstream films

always try to naturalize a narrative first. Besides, impossible puzzle films do exist in between classical narratives and art-house ones, which accounts for a certain number of art cinema traits, in addition to their general complexity.

Nevertheless, if this minor theoretical contradiction can be thus solved, other aspects of the book cannot. *Impossible Puzzle Films*, which is divided into two more or less separate parts – the first devoted to structural complexity and narrative patterns, the second to sense-making and the cognitive appreciation of complex cinema in general and impossible puzzle films in particular – is as convoluted and difficult as the category it deals with, and too informative and dense. The authors try too hard to make the book scientific and cohesive, providing an account of several theories that explain certain methodologies they employ or subjects they approach. For example, they explain what embodied cognition is in order to justify their overall cognitive analytical focus. This encyclopaedic tendency may at times diffuse their main argument since viewers' reactions to the category of impossible puzzle films are later explained in a less cognitively embodied fashion than the explanation they provide of that process in 2.1, 3.4. and 3.5. Also, the theorists that Kiss and Willemsen draw upon are specifically chosen to corroborate their own perspective. Overall, there are too many, and the superimposition of these different reasonings is hard to recall while following Kiss and Willemsen's rationale. On page 71 the authors quote Marie-Laure Ryan in the hope of credibly justifying their theoretical conflation, observing that "[th]is method consists of quoting scientific research in support of more or less independently developed theses concerning the reading [or viewing] process." The use of other authors' theories as building blocks to their own theoretical organization of the subject, makes Kiss and Willemsen's book less innovative at a micro-level.

Contrasting with this desire to be thorough and scientific, Kiss and Willemsen base the majority of their claims for classical and modernist cinema (as

well as their specific narrative varieties) on just two sources: respectively, David Bordwell and András Bálint Kovács. One would expect a more developed theoretical background in a book about such an innovative category of films positioned in the confluence of classical and modernist narrative. Instead, the authors seemingly explore (almost) all that has been explicitly written on "complex cinema and narrative," but do not care to inquire into the origins of this mid-90s tendency. They repeatedly refer to Alain Resnais's film *Last Year at Marienbad* (1961) as the epitome of the modernist art film, but they do not draw on the writings of the French narrative theorists of the period, namely Alain Robbe-Grillet (who is the screenwriter of *Marienbad*) and Jean Ricardou, not to mention some Anglo-Saxon theorists of related metafictional areas, such as Steven G. Kellman, Robert Scholes, and Patricia Waugh. Instead, they take Bálint Kovács book as a bible for all things modernist, although the book is not specifically a study of narrative.

However, despite these shortcomings, there is no doubt that *Impossible Puzzle Films: A Cognitive Approach to Contemporary Complex Cinema* merits a place in any academic syllabus dealing with this subject.

## BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Fátima Chinita is an Associate Professor at the Theatre and Film School of the Lisbon Polytechnic Institute in Portugal, where she teaches Film Studies, Film Narrative and Film Production. She has a PhD in Artistic Studies, BA's both in Literature and in Cinema, and an MA in Communication Sciences. She is the author of the book *The (In)visible Spectator: Reflexivity from the Film Viewer's Perspective in David Lynch's INLAND EMPIRE* [published in Portuguese]. She is currently a post-doctoral fellow (supported by FCT - SFRH/BDP/113196/2015), researching Intermediality and Inter-arts in Labcom.IFP of University of Beira Interior, in Portugal, and the IMS – Intermediality and Multimodality Centre of the University of Linnaeus, in Sweden.